

## CHAPTER 29

### *Al- 'Ankabût: The Spider*

(REVEALED AT MAKKAH: 7 sections; 69 verses)

This chapter is entitled *The Spider* from the fact that false, idolatrous, and polytheistic beliefs are here (verse 41) compared with a spider's web. The significance is clear: false beliefs will not stand the test of time, and they shall be swept away before the strong current of Truth. This chapter and the three following form another group of Makkan revelation, each being headed by the letters *alif*, *lam*, *mîm*, and each containing clear prophecies of the onward march of Islam, and may be given the name of the *Alif lam mîm* Makkan group. These chapters belong to the close of the early, or the beginning of the middle, Makkan period.

The last chapter predicted in plain words a triumphal return of the Holy Prophet to Makkah, thus indicating the triumph of Islâm. Here we are told that the great object of the triumph of Truth has never been achieved except by suffering sore afflictions and severe trials in its cause. Hence trials and persecutions were necessary. Starting thus, there is a reference to the persecution of children by their very parents, and the converts to Islâm are told that they must yield to their parents in all other matters, but must resolutely reject false doctrines. The second, third and fourth sections make brief references to the histories of Nûḥ, Ibrâhîm, Lûṭ and other prophets, showing how the righteous had always to undergo trials and how they were subjected to persecutions, but false beliefs had no basis and had always been swept away by Truth. At the end of the fourth section, false beliefs are compared with a spider's web, thus illustrating their extreme frailty. The fifth section refers to the purifying effect of the Qur'ân, and the repeated demand for more signs is met with the simple answer that the Holy Word of Allâh was in itself a sufficiently clear sign, because it wrought a transformation in the lives of those who followed it. The sixth section warns the disbelievers of the fate in store for them and of the consequences of their tyrannical persecutions of the Muslims; it also comforts the latter by stating that their sufferings will soon be changed into a state of happiness. The seventh section shows that Allâh, Who deals mercifully even with the disbelievers, will not allow the

exertions of the faithful in the cause of Truth to remain unfruitful, and that those who strive hard and earnestly will be guided in the right way, which is the way to success.

## SECTION 1: **Trials purify**

In the name of Allâh, the Beneficent, the Merciful.

### **1** *Alif lâm mîm*

**2** Do human beings think that they will be left alone on saying, We believe, and will not be tried?<sup>a</sup>

**3** And indeed We tried those before them, so Allâh will certainly know those who are true and He will know the liars.<sup>a</sup>

**4** Or do they who work evil think that they will escape Us? Evil is it that they judge!

**5** Whoever hopes to meet with Allâh, the term of Allâh is then surely coming. And He is the Hearing, the Knowing.

**6** And whoever strives hard, strives for himself. Surely Allâh is Self-sufficient, above (need of) (His) creatures.<sup>a</sup>

**7** And those who believe and do good, We shall certainly do away with their afflictions and reward them for the best of what they did.<sup>a</sup>

**2a.** By the trials spoken of in these verses are meant the persecutions of the believers by the disbelievers. This is made clear in verse 10. A misconception as to the nature of these trials has led some critics to think that the first ten verses must have been revealed at Madînah.

**3a.** The *knowing* in this case relates to knowledge of the event when it takes place, when reward or punishment is meted out to a human being for what he or she does. Allâh knows what a human being will do but does not reward or punish, until He knows that the human being has done a deed.

**6a.** As shown in 25:52a, the word *jihad* occurs in Makkan revelation frequently, and carries its proper significance of *striving hard* in Allâh's way. The suffering of persecutions and tortures at the hands of their enemies for the sake of their faith was no less a *jihad* for the Muslims at Makkah than their fighting in defence of Islâm at Madînah.

**7a.** *Kafara*, as also *kaffara*, means originally *he covered or concealed*, and *kaffaral-sayyi'at*, *he did away with the evil or effaced it* (*Arabic-English Lexicon* by Edward William Lane). *Sayyi'ah* has a double significance; it means *an evil deed or a sin*, as also *an evil accident, a trial or an affliction* (*Arabic-English Lexicon* by Edward William Lane). Hence the words *la-nukaffiranna 'an-hum sayyi'âti-him* may signify either *the doing away with their afflictions or trials*, or *the doing away with their evil deeds*. I prefer the first because it is of the trials and afflictions of the believers that these verses speak. If the second significance is adopted, it would mean that the evil deeds which the believers did before they accepted the Truth would be effaced, because the course of their lives was now changed.

**8** And We have enjoined on human beings goodness to his or her parents. But if they contend with you to associate (others) with Me, of which you have no knowledge, obey them not. To Me is your return, so I will inform you of what you did.<sup>a</sup>

**9** And those who believe and do good, We shall surely make them enter among the righteous.

**10** And among human beings is he or she who says: We believe in Allâh; but when he or she is persecuted for the sake of Allâh, he or she thinks the persecution of human beings to be as the chastisement of Allâh.<sup>a</sup> And if there comes help from your *Rabb*, they will say: Surely we were with you. Is not Allâh the Best Knower of what is in the hearts of humankind?

**11** And certainly Allâh will know those who believe, and He will know the hypocrites.

**8a.** This verse, while signifying the importance of obedience to parents, warns against attaching over-importance even to filial duty. It shows that when an important duty clashes with a still higher one, the former is to be sacrificed for the latter. It is related that when Sa'd ibn Abî Waqqâs became a convert to Islâm, his mother swore that she would neither eat nor drink, until he reverted to disbelief, and that this verse was revealed on that occasion. It is a further proof that these verses were revealed at Makkah, because Sa'd was one of the early converts. In fact, it was at Makkah that children had to leave their parents on account of their conversion to Islâm, the parents not allowing them to forsake their old religion.

**10a.** The meaning is that those who are weak in faith consider the persecution by the disbelievers, which was necessary to strengthen and purify their faith, as if it were a

punishment from Allâh for their change of faith. The latter part of the verse is a prophecy as to what the weak in faith will say when they see the help of Allah coming to the Muslims.

**12** And those who disbelieve say to those who believe: Follow our path and we will bear your wrongs. And they can never bear aught of their wrongs. Surely they are liars.

**13** And they will certainly bear their own burdens, and other burdens besides their own burdens; and they will certainly be questioned on the day of Resurrection as to what they forged.<sup>a</sup>

## SECTION 2: Nûh and Ibrâhîm

**14** And We indeed sent Nûh to his people, so he remained among them a thousand years save fifty years.<sup>a</sup> And the deluge overtook them, and they were wrongdoers.

**15** So We delivered him and the inmates of the ark, and made it a sign to the nations.

**16** And (We sent) Ibrâhîm, when he said to his people: Serve Allâh and keep your duty to Him. That is better for you, if you did but know.

**17** You only worship idols besides Allâh and you invent a lie. Surely they whom you serve besides Allâh control no sustenance for you; so seek sustenance from Allâh and serve Him and be grateful to Him. To Him you will be brought back.

**13a.** It should be noted that the Qur'ân does not anywhere say that the burden of one shall be taken away by another. Each one is responsible for what he does. The "other burdens" are really their own burdens in misleading others, and thus the two burdens spoken of here are the burden of one's own wrongdoing and the burden of misleading others.

**14a.** The Holy man-made Bible gives 950 years to be the age of Nûh. It is not improbable that the span of human being's life may have been greater in his earlier history than at present, and Nûh may have attained an extraordinary age among his compatriots. But the verse must be seen as *Mutashâbihât* therefore the reference here is to the abiding for 950 years of the law preached by Nûh, - his place then being taken by Ibrâhîm and the reference may be to these 950 years, as the mention of Ibrâhîm immediately afterwards shows.

**18** And if you reject, nations before you did indeed reject (the Truth). And the duty of the Messenger is only to deliver (the message) plainly.

**19** See they not how Allâh originates the creation, then reproduces it? Surely that is easy to Allâh.<sup>a</sup>

**20** Say: Travel in the earth then see how He makes the first creation, then Allâh creates the latter creation. Surely Allâh is Possessor of power over all things.<sup>a</sup>

**21** He chastises whom He pleases and has mercy on whom He pleases, and to Him you will be turned back.

**22** And you cannot escape in the earth nor in the samâ', and you have no protector or helper besides Allâh.

### SECTION 3: **Ibrâhîm and Lût**

**23** And those who disbelieve in the messages of Allâh and the meeting with Him, they despair of My mercy, and for them is a painful chastisement.

**19a.** The law of creation and destruction of things, which is constantly working in nature, finds an expression in the lives of nations: a nation is brought into existence, then it is swept away and a new nation rose in its stead. It is to this law that the verse refers as a warning to the idolatrous Makkans that the time had now come when their place would be taken by another nation. This is made clear in the verses that follow.

It should be noted that verses 18 – 23 are parenthetical, being an address to the opponents of the Holy Prophet. The Qur'ân frequently adopts this method of warning in the middle of another narration, for its object is not to relate a story, but to warn those who opposed the spread of Truth as revealed to the Holy Prophet.

**20a.** Elsewhere, the words *travel in the earth* are always followed by *then see what was the end of the rejectors*, instead of which we have here *how He makes the first creation, then Allâh creates the latter creation*. The apparent identity of the significance of these two statements is thus made clearer by the comparison, which shows that what is meant is the disappearance of one nation to give place to another.

**24** So naught was the answer of his people except that they said: Slay him or burn him! But Allāh delivered him from the fire. Surely therein are signs for a people who believe.<sup>a</sup>

**25** And he said: You have only taken idols besides Allāh by way of friendship between you in this world's life, then on the day of Resurrection some of you will deny others, and some of you will curse others; and your abode is the Fire, and you will have no helpers.

**26** So Lūṭ believed in him. And he said: I am fleeing to my *Rabb*. Surely He is the Mighty, the Wise.<sup>a</sup>

**27** And We granted him Ishāq and Ya'qūb, and ordained prophethood and the Book among his seed. And We gave him his reward in this world, and in the Hereafter he will surely be among the righteous.

**28** And (We sent) Lūṭ, when he said to his people: Surely you are guilty of an abomination which none of the nations has done before you.

**29** Do you come to males and commit robbery on the highway, and commit evil deeds in your assemblies?<sup>a</sup> But the answer of his people was only that they said: Bring on us Allāh's chastisement, if thou art truthful.

**24a.** As in 21:69, so here, it is not stated that Ibrāhīm was actually cast into the fire. On the other hand, the plan was either *to slay* or *to burn* him, and therefore the *fire* may only stand for the opposition which these plans involved.

**26a.** The words *I am fleeing to my Rabb* indicate his flight to another country whither he was commanded to flee by his *Rabb*. This is more clearly stated in 19:48: "And I withdraw from you," being followed by the statement made in 19:49: "So when he withdrew from them". This makes it further clear that his deliverance from the fire was brought about by his flight to another country.

**29a.** Three evils are ascribed to Lūṭ's people — unnatural crime, highway robbery, and openly committing evil deeds in their assemblies. Therefore it is a mistake to explain all incidents in connection with Lūṭ's story only with reference to unnatural crime as the sole evil of which they were guilty. *Qat' al-sabīl* is, according to *Kashshâf* (Commentary), by Abu-l-Qâsim Maḥmūd ibn 'Umar al-Zamakhsharî, "the work of robbers, killing human beings and seizing their property". *Jâmi' al-Bayân fî Tafsi'r al-Qur'ân* (Commentary), by Al-Shaikh Mu'în al-Dîn ibn Safî al-Dîn adds after the words *taqta'ûn al-sabīl* by way of explaining them, "for they used to murder the

passers-by and rob them of their property”. Other commentators give similar explanations.

**30** He said: My *Rabb*, help me against the mischievous people.

#### SECTION 4: **Opposition to Truth ever a Failure**

**31** And when Our messengers came to Ibrâhîm with good news, they said: We are going to destroy the people of this town, for its people are iniquitous.

**32** He said: Surely in it is Lût. They said: We know well who is in it; we shall certainly deliver him and his followers, except his wife; she is of those who remain behind.

**33** And when Our messengers came to Lût, he was grieved on account of them, and he lacked strength to protect them.<sup>a</sup> And they said: Fear not, nor grieve; surely we will deliver you and your followers, except your wife — she is of those who remain behind.

**34** Surely We are going to bring down upon the people of this town a punishment from *samâ'*, because they transgressed.

**33a.** *Dhar'* signifies literally *the stretching forth of the arm*, and thus stands for *power* or *ability* or *extent of power*; and *dâqa bi-l-amri dhar'-an* means *he was unable to accomplish the affair*, or *he lacked strength to accomplish the affair* (Arabic-English Lexicon by Edward William Lane).

**35** And certainly We have left a clear sign of it for a people who understand.<sup>a</sup>

**36** And to Midian (We sent) their brother Shu'aib, so he said: O my people, serve Allâh and fear the Latter day, and act not corruptly, making mischief, in the land.

**37** But they rejected him, so a severe earthquake overtook them and they lay prostrate in their abodes.

**38** And 'Âd and Thamûd! And some of their dwellings are indeed apparent to you. And the *shaitân* made their deeds fair-seeming to them, so he kept them back from the path, and they could see clearly.

**39** And Korah and Pharaoh and Hâmân! And certainly Mûsâ came to them with clear arguments, but they behaved haughtily in the land; and they could not outstrip (Us).

**40** So each one We punished for his sin. Of them was he on whom We sent a violent storm, and of them was he whom the rumbling overtook, and of them was he whom We caused the earth to swallow, and of them was he whom We drowned.<sup>a</sup> And it was not Allâh, Who wronged them, but they wronged themselves.

**41** The parable of those who take guardians besides Allâh is as the parable of the spider that makes for itself a house; and surely the frailest of the houses is the spider's house — if they but knew!<sup>a</sup>

**35a.** Sodom and Gomorrah, the cities destroyed, are in the neighbourhood of the Dead Sea, on the road from Arabia: "And it is on a road that still abides" (15:76).

**40a.** See 7:72a for the *storm*; 7:78a, 84a for the *rumbling*; 28:81a for the *swallowing*; 2:50a, 7:64a for the *drowning*.

**42** Surely Allâh knows whatever they call upon besides Him. And He is the Mighty, the Wise.

**43** And these parables, We set them forth for human beings, and none understand them but the learned.

**44** Allâh created the *samâwât* and the earth with truth. Surely there is a sign in this for the believers.

## **Part 21**

### **SECTION 5: The Qur'ân is a Purifier**

**45** Recite that which has been revealed to you of the Book and keep up prayer. Surely prayer keeps (one) away from indecency and evil; and certainly the remembrance of Allâh is the greatest (force). And Allâh knows what you do.<sup>a</sup>

**41a.** A trust in false deities, which really stands for all false beliefs, is here compared with a spider's web to express the nature of its extreme frailty. It may prosper for a time, but no sooner is the light of criticism and research brought to bear upon it than it vanishes and leaves no trace behind.

There is also a reference here to the plans of the Holy Prophet's opponents, which were destined to be brought to naught by reason of their inability to withstand the overwhelming advance of Truth.



**45a.** This verse invites the followers of all religions to accept the Qur'ân on account of its purifying effect upon life, as the previous scriptures had ceased to effect deliverance from the bondage of sin, which is the real object of revelation. The verse also lays down the right principle for getting rid of the bondage of sin in the words *the remembrance of Allâh is the greatest*, i.e., *the most powerful and effective restraint* upon sin. It is a living belief in the Divine power, knowledge, and goodness that restrains human beings from walking in the ways of His displeasure. A sure and certain knowledge that every evil action leads to an evil consequence, that there is a Supreme Being, Who knows what is hid from human eyes and Whose moral law is effective where the moral force of society fails, that He is the source of all goodness and it is through goodness that human beings can have communion with Him, are the only effective restraints upon evil.

It should also be noted that the recitation of the Book, the keeping up of prayer, and the remembrance of Allâh are really identical; for the Qur'ân is recited in prayers, and the Qur'ân is the best means of the remembrance of Allâh. Every line of it brings before the mind of the reader the goodness, power, and knowledge of the Divine Being, while there is no other Book which fulfils this requirement. The Qur'ân is neither a book of law, though it contains the principles of the laws necessary for the guidance of human beings, nor a book of sacred history, though it contains the necessary sacred history, but it is pre-eminently a Book that manifests the glory, greatness, grandeur, goodness, love, purity, power, and knowledge of the Supreme Being.

While, as generally understood, by the remembrance of Allâh is meant His glorification and praise in prayer, 'Abd Allâh ibn 'Abbâs (Companion) is reported to have said that by the *dhikr* (remembrance) of Allâh is here meant Allâh's remembrance of human beings or His raising him to a place of eminence (*Jâmi' al-Bayân fî Tafsîr al-Qur'ân* (Commentary), by Imâm Abû Ja'far Muḥammad ibn Jarîr al-Tabarî). Thus the significance would be that through prayer to Allâh, not only is human beings freed from the bondage of sin, but (which is greater than this) he is raised to a place of higher eminence.

**46** And argue not with the People of the Book except by what is best,<sup>a</sup> save such of them as act unjustly.<sup>b</sup> But say: We believe in that which has been revealed to us and revealed to you, and our Deity and your Deity is One, and to Him we submit.

**47** And thus have We revealed the Book to you.<sup>a</sup> So those whom We have given the Book believe in it, and of these<sup>b</sup> there are those who believe in it; and none deny Our messages except the disbelievers.

**46a.** It should be noted that this passage deals only with the mode of controversy to be adopted in inviting those who already had scriptures in their hands — which the Arabs had not — to the truth of Islâm and the revelation of the Qur'ân. The Qur'ân makes its own meaning clear when it explains that it is the broad principles of religion that should demand paramount consideration. The fundamental principle of religion is that Allâh exists and that He reveals Himself to human beings and it is common to all revealed religions. The only difference is that a Muslim's is a purer monotheism, a conception of the Divine Being which gives the most perfect attributes to Him while declaring Him to be free from all imperfections and weaknesses, a conception which cannot reasonably be criticized by anyone who admits a belief in a Supreme Being. A Muslim's conception of Divine revelation is wider than that of the follower of any other religion, recognizing, as it does, that Divine revelation is granted in all ages and to all nations. A Muslim, therefore, admits the truth of all the prophets and revelations, and the follower of any other way of life has nothing to lose but everything to gain by accepting Islâm.

**46b.** The significance of the words *save such of them as act unjustly* is not that controversy is to be carried on with these in a different manner, but that the unjust would not accept this reasonable interpretation of the principles of *Dîn*. This is made clear in the verse that follows.

**47a.** *And thus have We revealed the Book*; that is, by confirming the truth of all previous revelation.

**48** And you did not recite before it any book, nor did you transcribe one with your right hand, for then could the liars have doubted.<sup>a</sup>

**49** Nay, it is clear messages in the hearts of those who are granted knowledge.<sup>a</sup> And none deny Our messages except the iniquitous.

**50** And they say: Why are not signs sent down upon him from his *Rabb*? Say: Signs are with Allâh only, and I am only a plain warner.<sup>a</sup>

**51** Is it not enough for them that We have revealed to you the Book which is recited to them? Surely there is mercy in this and a reminder for a people who believe.<sup>a</sup>

**47b.** The reference in *these* is to the Arabs, who possessed no sacred scriptures.

**48a.** The broad principles of religion and the beautiful moral and religious truths which find expression in the Qur'ân could not have been collected, if such a collection by human exertion were possible, except by one who had knowledge of all the previous scriptures; but the Holy Prophet had not read even a single book. He could neither read nor write. What might have been said against a prophet like 'Îsâ that he had read the previous scriptures and collected some beautiful truths from them, could not be said against the Holy Prophet, for the latter could neither read nor write, and his inability to do either is thus a confirmation of his truth. Leaving aside all the principles and truths, if we consider the broad principles that Islâm taught with regard to the truth of Divine revelation in all ages and to all nations, a truth never taught or recognized by any religion or by any human being before the Holy Prophet, it is remarkable that such a broad truth should have been preached by one who had never read the scriptures of any religion and who lived in a country which was almost cut off from all communication with other countries. See also 7:157a.

**49a.** The Qur'ân contains not only truths which are met with in previous scriptures, but also others which are not to be found in any scripture, and which are only in the breasts of the learned ones, or those that may ever be conceived by the learned ones. What the most progressive religious thought of today considers desirable for the basis of a common religion of humanity is met with in Islâm.

**50a.** The Prophet is a warner, and gives warning in due time that the signs are with Allâh, Whose power to send these signs they deny. Read also in this connection verses 53–55, which uphold the coming of the punishment, leaving no doubt as to the meaning of signs being *with Allâh*.

**51a.** This is another reply to those who demanded signs. The Qur'ân is a mercy, if they would only accept it. They could see how the believers had benefited by it; how a wonderful transformation had been wrought in their lives. Was it not a sufficient sign for them? Indeed, this was direct evidence of the truth of the Holy Word, for to effect a pure transformation in the lives of those who would follow it was its avowed object, while the overthrow of its enemies was only an indirect testimony.

## SECTION 6: Warning and Consolation

**52** Say: Allâh is sufficient as a witness between me and you — He knows what is in the *samâwât* and the earth. And those who believe in falsehood and disbelieve in Allâh, these it is that are the losers.

**53** And they ask you to hasten on the chastisement. And had not a term been appointed, the chastisement would certainly have come to them. And certainly it will come to them all of a sudden, while they perceive not.

**54** They ask you to hasten on the chastisement, and surely hell encompasses the disbelievers<sup>a</sup>—

**55** The day when the chastisement will cover them from above them, and from beneath their feet!<sup>a</sup> And He will say: Taste what you did.

**56** O My servants who believe, surely My earth is vast, so serve Me only.<sup>a</sup>

**57** Every *nafs* must taste of death; then to Us you will be returned.

**54a.** Here the punishment of this life, which the disbelievers would hasten, is called *a hell*. If this verse is taken as indicating the punishment of the life after death, it is a transition from the punishment of this life to the punishment after death.

**55a.** The expression used is simply to indicate the all-encompassing nature of the punishment, which will not leave them a way to escape. Compare 6:65, and see 6:65a.

**56a.** This is to comfort the Muslims against the severe persecutions by their enemies. If they are persecuted at Makkah, they will find a refuge elsewhere.

**58** And those who believe and do good, We shall certainly give them an abode in high places in the Garden wherein flow rivers, abiding therein. Excellent the reward of the workers,

**59** Who are patient, and on their *Rabb* they rely!

**60** And how many a living creature carries not its sustenance! Allâh sustains it and yourselves. And He is the Hearing, the Knowing.<sup>a</sup>

**61** And if you ask them, Who created the *samâwât* and the earth and made the sun and the moon subservient? they would say, Allâh. Whence are they then turned away?

**62** Allâh makes abundant the means of subsistence for whom He pleases of His servants, or straitens (them) for him. Surely Allâh is Knower of all things.

**63** And if you ask them, Who is it that sends down water from the clouds, then gives life to the earth with it after its death? they will say, Allâh. Say: Praise be to Allâh! Nay, most of them understand not.<sup>a</sup>

## SECTION 7: Triumph of the Faithful

**64** And the life of this world is but a sport and a play. And the home of the Hereafter, that surely is the Life, did they but know!

**60a.** This is a consolation to the Muslims that the giving up of their concerns and business at Makkah will not lead to their ruin.

**63a.** Most of them did not understand that the dead earth was now about to be raised to life.

**65** So when they ride in the ships, they call upon Allâh, being sincerely obedient to Him; but when He brings them safe to the land, lo! they associate others (with Him),

**66** That they may be ungrateful for what We have given them, and that they may enjoy. But they shall soon know.

**67** See they not that We have made a sacred territory secure, while human beings are carried off by force from around them?<sup>a</sup> Will they still believe in the falsehood and disbelieve in the favour of Allâh?

**68** And who is more iniquitous than one who forges a lie against Allâh, or gives the lie to the Truth, when it has come to him? Is there not an abode in hell for the disbelievers?

**69** And those who strive hard for Us, We shall certainly guide them in Our ways. And Allâh is surely with the doers of good.

**67a.** The *haram* ("sacred territory") includes the city of Makkah and several miles of territory around it. War is forbidden within these limits. The reference in *human beings are carried off by force* is to the great insecurity of life and property in Arabia, while no one dared violate the sacredness of Makkah.